

When Dreams Die: Cancelled Programs, Associated Grief, and Implications for Managing Innovation

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Agenda

1. The idea begins
 - Loss of contract bid at Big Aircraft Company
2. The idea germinates
 - Research on cancelled programs
 - My concurrent experience of pregnancy loss
 - Reciprocally using each to come to grips with the other
3. Observations continue
 - More New Product Introduction experience and conversations
4. Implications for managing innovation
 - Anthropologists' view
 - Program manager's view

Legal Disclaimer

The ideas in this presentation are my own. They do not represent the opinions of my current or previous employers. They have been developed with no funding from my current or previous employers.

This presentation builds on material previously published in the following:

- *Expertise, Disagreement, and Bad Things: Turbulent Knowledge amidst Organizational Stress in Engineering R&D*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2007
- Letters to My Unborn Children: Meditations on the Silent Grief of Miscarriage. Minneapolis, MN: Quill House Press, 2012.

Chapter 7 – The Engineering / Anthropology Value

Proposition I Tried to Create, and What I Learned
Along the Way

7.5 Future Work

7.5.1 Re-telling the ‘Old, Old Story’

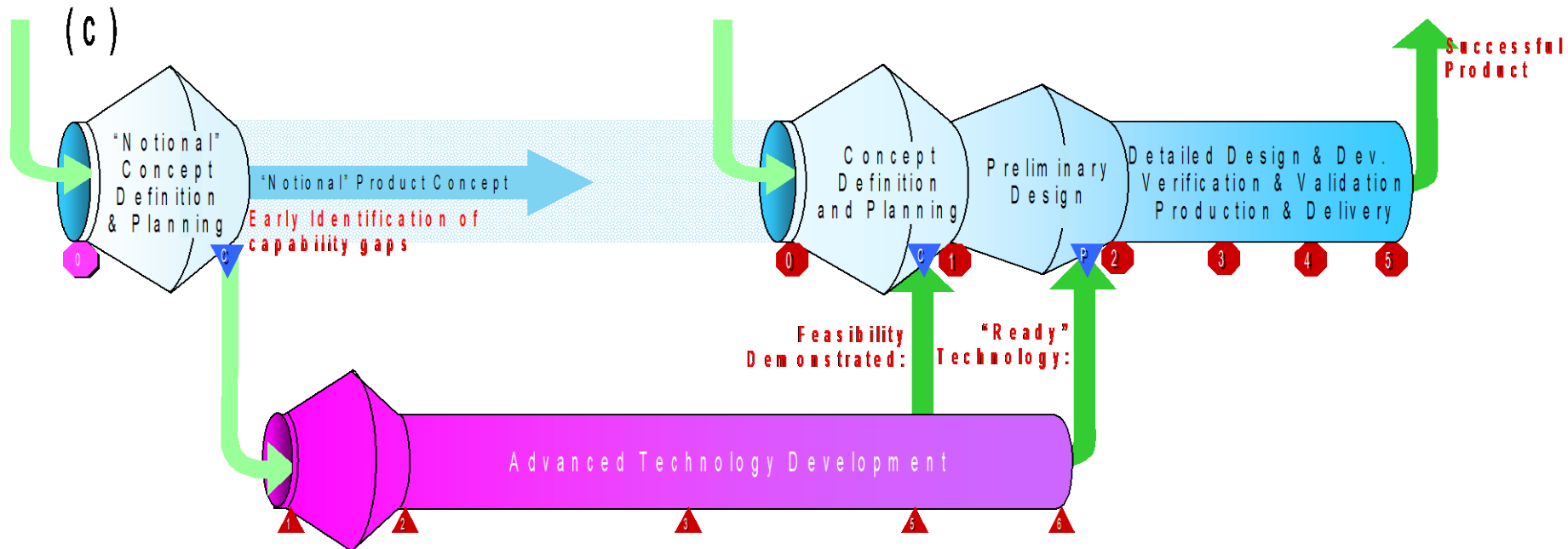
7.5.2 Terminal Illness and Grief in Product Development

7.5.3 Organizational “Dirty work”

Chapter 5 – Letter to my Six Children

1. The Miscarriages in Our Worldview – Seeking a Narrative
2. The Miscarriages in Our Past and Present – Choosing to Remember
3. The Miscarriages in Our Family – the Open Hand
4. The Miscarriages in Our Workplaces – Humanity’s Wounds
5. Facing the Future Together

Context: New Product Introduction “Pipeline”



The idea begins: lost bid for a new contract

- Big Aircraft Company assumes it will win a large contract for a new aircraft
- Their competitor wins
- Big Aircraft Company must immediately redeploy people who worked on the project that didn't get the contract
- Fred was assigned to the Propulsion team where I was interning

Fred

I need to go over to the other building to clear up a few more things.

Charlie (propulsion manager)

Technically there's no charge number for him to do that. People experience things like this the way they experience death. If I don't give him space to grieve that program, he'll be less productive here on our project.

The idea builds: Clean Energy at SmallComp

Industry context

- Industry interest grows in clean energy and energy security through the 1990s and early 2000s
- Various state and federal incentives / grants are put in place to encourage growth

Company context

- SmallComp says “we can play this game”
 - We have existing energy products
 - We can expand into transportation and get economies of scale
- SmallComp expands its product portfolio
 - Transportation partnerships (vehicle propulsion and APU)
 - Stationary power using multiple clean energy technologies
 - Aggressive hiring to staff these programs
 - Includes recruiting Shawn in 2002 and asking “can your anthropology training help us train all these new engineers?”

The idea grows: SmallComp's Downturn

Industry

- Envisioned market “pull” doesn’t materialize
- US government revises some of its clean energy forecasts (e.g., fuel cell vehicles) to “2020 and beyond”

SmallComp (Q1 – Q2 2004)

- Core technology is immature and doesn’t meet market price point
- Workforce reduction in aftermath of several cancelled programs

Shawn

- Can I get a PhD thesis out of this?
- Advisor – why not study an organization under stress and their ability to learn from experience?

Smallcomp Products: 2004 - 2007

Transportation Power	Product 1	Discontinued
	Product 2	Cancelled
	Product 3	Continued
	Product 4	Continued
	Product 5	Launched
	Product 6	Launched
Stationary Power	Product 7	Cancelled
	Product 8	Cancelled
	Product 9	Cancelled & Relaunched
	Product 10	Continued
	Product 11	Launched

The idea grows: SmallComp's Response

“Every time Ted applauds the SmallPlant program, those of us who worked on LargePlant feel a stab of pain [my paraphrase, not his words]. Celebrating the apparent success of a small tightly constrained program criticizes and devalues the hard work done on a large, poorly constrained program that ultimately failed for reasons beyond any one person’s control. The unfortunate irony is that these people are reminded of their apparent failure on a regular basis, even as SmallComp is trying to find desperately needed good news to keep it going during this phase of uncertainty.”

The idea germinates: When it really hit home

At home (Q2 – Q3, 2004)

- Miscarriage #1 – “It hurts, but it happens a lot; we’ll move on”
- Miscarriage #2 – “I don’t have a framework to address this”

What I couldn’t address

- I had no clue this could happen, or that it was so common.
- We didn’t tell anyone. We just “moved on.” Except we couldn’t.
- We wanted to isolated controllable factors. But they were random events.
- Trying to control things actually made it worse (more personal / marital stress).
- My wife and I disagreed about what happened, or how to handle it.
- I was sad, and sometimes bitter, when I saw others with small children.

What I found while “using the office as a PhD research site” (Q3 – Q4, 2004)

- Replace “death” with “cancellation,” and everything above applies
- Replace “spouse” with “coworker,” and everything above applies
- Replace “small children” with “new programs” and everything above applies
- All this impacts ability to work effectively in the “world after the death”

Observations Continue: Product Launch

Project Begins with big dreams

- Successful bid demonstrate power of multi-site NPI
- Chief engineer speaks of returning to the “golden age of aerospace”

Cancelled for multiple (mostly) uncontrollable reasons

- Global economic uncertainty
- Unrecognized product complexity and scope
- Under-appreciated challenges of distributed teams working together

Leading to expressions of grief

- “I came over here to build a capability. All I have to show for it is a quiet return to [my host site] after 3 months planning office moves.”

And opportunities for care

- “Kevin, we learned how to do NPI on [the cancelled program]. Without your leadership, we wouldn’t be working on [recent new program]. You did start the growth of a capability.”

Observations Continue: Pregnancy and Loss

Trevor

- Apprehension when his wife gets pregnant, followed by silence when she miscarries
- Quietly asks me “how long after your miscarriages did you wait to try again?”
- Angrily voices frustration during the first trimester of his wife’s subsequent pregnancy that all he can do is wait.

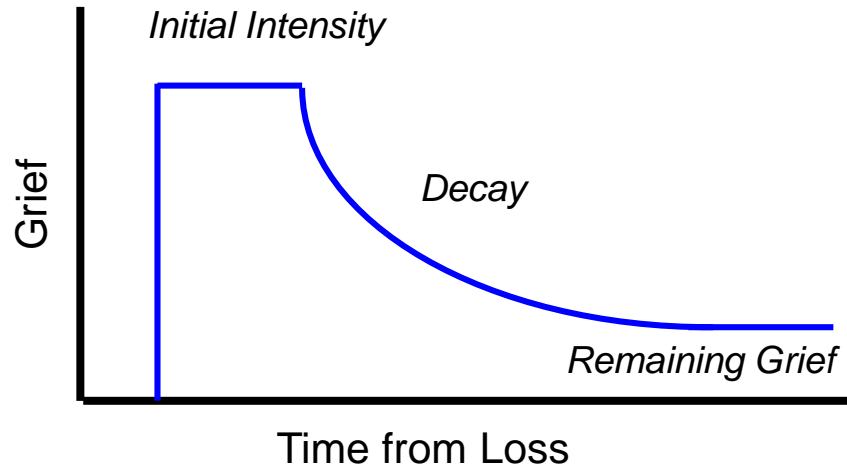
Shawn

- Healthy daughter #2 born, followed by miscarriage #3
- Angrily says to Trevor after the third miscarriage that “I’m ready to give up”

Mutual care in the conference rooms

- Sharing our stories
- Encouragement that you’re not alone
- Encouragement not to lose hope

Responding to Death in the Office



Varying Experience of Loss / Grief

I've worked on cancelled programs. I've lived through miscarriage. Move on.

My old job used cancelled programs as learning points for the organization. Part of the difference is they funded programs internally. In aerospace, we work with customer funding. A cancelled program almost always means a lost customer, which is like a death in the family.

Hurting versus Caring

[in an all-hands meeting]: We cancelled the program because it failed.

[in a group meeting]: It's unfortunate he used the term failure.

I worked on a cancelled program where management did two critical things. First, they emphatically stated that the cancellation was nobody's fault. Second, they told us to preserve everything we'd done in case a future opportunity allowed us to work on the material again. Sure enough we had that chance a couple years later.

Varying Experience of Loss / Grief

It's funny you mentioned Big Aircraft Company. I know several of people there who are still upset about losing that contract.

A lot of what happens is anger. We had really good people, we did really good work, and management pulled it all away. What just happened?

What does this mean for managing innovation?

Engineers work in conditions that create grief, and therefore opportunity for care

- Death occurs when work is removed from the person
- Death also occurs when the person is removed from their work
- Heavy emotional investment in their work
 - MGMT 101 tells you to foster this
 - Environmental activism (in energy companies), self-perception of expertise (in aerospace)

I'm cautious about formalizing care, but I'm skeptical about NPI rhetoric

- Miscarriage precedent of birth / death certificates, FMLA recognition, etc, has taken decades of advocacy
- "Do it right the first time" / innovation hubs don't acknowledge failed / cancelled products

I think there are opportunities for grassroots management

- Hidden communities of support
- I'm not alone (common stories within / across organizations)
- Choosing compassion versus bitterness (at management and working level)
- "Death" doesn't have to be the end of the story

I'd appreciate feedback

Am I flat out wrong?

Does the thought process make sense?

Does any of this resonate with your own experiences of “death in the office?”

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I'll share coffee / tea or a pint with you if our paths cross in Indianapolis.

Backup Slides

Where I'm trying to get

Nicholas Wolterstorff, reflecting on writing Lament for a Son

I see now, looking back, that in writing it I was struggling to own my grief. The modern Western practice is to disown one's grief: to get over it, to put it behind one, to get on with life, to put it out of mind, to insure that it not become part of one's identity. My struggle was to own it, to make it part of my identity: if you want to know who I am, you must know that I am one whose son died. But then, to own it redemptively. It takes a long time to learn how to own one's suffering redemptively; one never finishes learning.

I'm trying to articulate in the book

- Redemptive ownership of my grief from pregnancy loss
 - Which involves understanding dynamics in the office

I'm trying to articulate for the office

- Redemptive ownership of grief from cancelled programs or other “big dreams” that don't reach completion